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ABSTRACT

One kind of research that may be used to improve the reading curriculum is the survey. Such a survey should be sent to all school district patrons. A specially designated committee should determine the items to be included in the survey, and a qualified editorial committee should write the survey items in their final form. Researchers will then be able to tell what is important to respondents in their school area or the entire school district. Many different approaches are available for teaching reading, and respondents may be asked their preference, just as they are asked their opinions about the time to be allotted for reading instruction. Another question is how to use the survey results. Survey results can give educators a better idea of the community's needs for curriculum development. (SLD)

Surveys, Research, and the Reading Curriculum

Marlow Ediger

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SURVEYS, RESEARCH, AND THE READING CURRICULUM

Research needs to be conducted to improve the reading curriculum. The best of objectives, learning opportunities, and appraisal procedures need to be in the offing for students. Parental involvement and the larger community, too, is important in providing input to improve reading instruction for learners. One kind of research which may be implemented is the survey approach to improve student results in reading achievement. The survey needs to be sent to all patrons in a district. If the district is very large, a representative sampling approach may be used.

Needed Survey Research Data in Reading

There is much research information needed by teachers and administrators to obtain in order that reading achievement for students is more optimal. A carefully develop survey form must be developed so that vital information is obtained. Hastily developed surveys which contain vague questions do not qualify as research. Items on the survey to be mailed to respondents need to be relevant. Thus, important items need to be thereon. Which might be important items to put into a survey? The following may be considered by a specially designated committee to consider:

- 1. teaching phonics systematically.**
- 2. emphasizing a whole language approach such as the Big Book or individualized reading.**
- 3. amount of time to be spent on drill and practice pertaining to phonics, syllabication, and context clues.**
- 4. higher levels of cognition to be stressed such as critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem solving.**
- 5. individual student work as compared to cooperative learning.**
- 6. teacher directed lessons in teaching reading as compared to peer teaching/interaction.**
- 7. high stakes testing versus local assessment of learner progress in reading achievement.**
- 8. teachers assisting parents to help offspring in teaching reading at home.**
- 9. free time for students to read self selected materials within a designated schedule during the school day.**
- 10. more frequent parent/teacher conferences on student reading achievement.**

Each of the above enumerated areas are important to place on a survey to be mailed to parents. However, each school needs to assess what are important items to placed in the questionnaire. Clarity of items

listed is very important so that respondents know what to respond to. Item #1 above pertaining to teaching phonics systematically for primary grade students may well need editing clarification in terms of the following five categories for the respondent to respond to, by encircling the number which best represents his/her thinking:

1. phonics taught using a basal text entirely devoted to instruction in sound/symbol relationships. 1 2 3 4 5. Researchers may substitute strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree to replace the numbers for each category...

2. phonics taught daily along with basal reader use. 1 2 3 4 5.

3. phonics taught within literature content studied from the basal reader. 1 2 3 4 5.

4. phonics emphasized as needed when a student cannot identify an unknown word. 1 2 3 4 5.

5. phonics stressed in Big Book procedures of reading instruction by rereading content therein, as needed, until mastered with the fluent reading of words. 1 2 3 4 5.

A qualified Editorial Committee needs to write items on the final form of the questionnaire to be mailed to respondents. Each of the five responses of reading instruction listed above may need further refinement and editing so that no misinterpretation of meaning is possible. Thus number one, above, on the questionnaire may be rewritten in the following way:

1. separate time should be given in teaching phonics to students during each school day. 1 2 3 4 5.

Respondents may then encircle to what degree they agree with the statement. Again, directions need to be clearly given as to encircling a number with its precise meaning such as strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and disagree strongly.

2. phonics should be taught each day together with the related story from the basal reader, but not separately. 1 2 3 4 5.

Questionnaire items 3, 4, and 5 should also be written as clearly as possible so that research results provide vital data for the researchers. Each respondent should interpret the statements in the same manner. It is good procedure to leave room for the word "other" with a blank space so that respondents may list a different approach in reading instruction than those mentioned.

Additional questionnaire items for the survey may include the following:

1. teachers need to teach reading that focuses largely on securing higher student test scores. 1 2 3 4 5.

2. teachers, as a major objective in reading instruction, should

assist students to think and reflect upon what has been read. 1 2 3 4 5.

3. teachers should strongly emphasize that students be able to read and understand subject matter in all curriculum areas such as literature, science, social studies, and mathematics. 1 2 3 4 5.

4. teachers should stress, as an important objective, students reading to learn important facts. 1 2 3 4 5.

5. teachers need to emphasize comprehension of what has been read so that students may be able to participate socially in discussions and other group experiences. 1 2 3 4 5.

By securing information from respondents pertaining to these five responses, the researchers may notice what is important to respondents such as high test scores in #1 immediately above. If high stakes testing is involved, then high test scores will indeed be salient for students to achieve. High stakes testing may/may not stress the concept of thinking about what has been read, #2 above. Respondents may wish to have students engage in critical and creative thinking as a major objective of reading instruction. Reading across the curriculum is emphasized in #3 above. Thus, respondents may want students to be taught how to read in all curriculum areas. Number four above may provide relevant feedback to the researchers in that selected respondents may deem the learning of facts to be essential as a goal in reading instruction. If a high number of respondents feel that way, perhaps the school needs to inform the public on the importance of higher levels of cognition, in clear and positive terms. Statement #5 pertains to students being able to and developing skills in orally presenting subject matter to others in an effective way; social development of the learner here receives high priority.

Readers will notice that there can be many vital goals in reading instruction. The point is. "What should receive major emphasis?" The time factor is important in a five hour school day. This helps respondents to focus carefully upon what is deemed to be very significant in teaching reading.

A third set of categories for individuals to respond to on the questionnaire might well include grouping of students for teaching reading. Among others, these may include the following:

1. mixed achievement levels (heterogeneous grouping) of students in reading should be taught in each classroom only. 1 2 3 4 5.

2. a uniform achievement group of students (homogeneous grouping) should be taught in each classroom only. 1 2 3 4 5.

3. both heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping of students for reading instruction should be emphasized in each classroom. 1 2 3 4 5.

4. cooperative learning (pupils working together within a committee to discuss subject matter read) should be stressed largely in the teaching of reading. 1 2 3 4 5.

5. each student should choose his/her own library books to read within an individualized reading program and discuss the ideas read with the teacher in a conference. 1 2 3 4 5.

Items # 1, 2, and 3 attempt to find out which plan of grouping is preferred by respondents --- heterogeneous versus homogeneous groups, or a combination of both. Items # 4 and 5 provides respondents a chance to voice preferences pertaining to group or individual work for students in reading. A place could also be left on the questionnaire for #6 entitled "other." Here respondents may indicate, perhaps, that both approaches should be used in reading instruction.

Materials and Methods of Teaching Reading

There are numerous materials available to teach reading. A few educators recommend that the basics be taught only. Perhaps, these advocates would state that the basal reader and a related workbook provide most of the experiences for students in reading instruction. Toward the other end of the continuum, reading specialists may emphasize a variety of activities be in the offing to help students become better readers. Thus on a questionnaire, respondents may react to each of the following materials: on a five point Likert scale:

1. reading teachers should use the basal reader and an accompanying workbook only, in the teaching of reading. 1 2 3 4 5.

2. reading teachers should use the basal reader, workbook, and related library books in reading instruction. 1 2 3 4 5.

3. reading teachers should use basal readers/workbooks, computerized reading programs, and library books, in teaching students to read.

4. reading teachers should emphasize all the materials of instruction, as in number four above, plus students dramatizing, using reader's theater, as well as making/using puppets involving subject matter read.

5. students should choose what they wish to read, based on personal interest, from a wide variety of reading materials in the school/classroom library, public library, and the home setting.

1 2 3 4 5.

Methods of instruction can vary much from each other. There are those who advocate a strictly reading teacher determination of methods whereas others advocate a very openended curriculum for students in learning to read. The following five categories may assist respondents to differentiate on preferred methods of reading instruction:

1. the teacher should strictly decide upon which methods to use in teaching reading. 1 2 3 4 5.

2. students and the teacher should plan together what to emphasize in the teaching of reading. 1 2 3 4 5.

3. students should largely work together in the teaching of reading with the teacher supervising that which is being emphasized in the cooperative learning activity. 1 2 3 4 5.

4. each student should choose what to read and then have a conference with the reading teacher to notice improvement in reading skills and comprehension over that of previous conferences.

5. the reading teacher should strongly attempt to raise student test scores in reading on statewide tests. 1 2 3 4 5.

Additional Items for the Questionnaire

What also might be very important for respondents to consider on a questionnaire which affects students, teachers, principals, parents, and others in society? The following considerations in improving reading instruction may also be considered for rating in a needs based assessment:

1. time allotment for reading instruction as compared to other curriculum areas.

2. means of appraising student achievement in reading.

3. student or teacher sequencing of learning experiences in reading.

4. correlation of reading instruction with other curriculum areas.

5. use of evaluation results to improve the reading curriculum.

Each of the above named items may be divided into five areas for respondents to react on a five point scale.

How should the returns of the questionnaires from respondents be tabulated? Each subdivision of a category of five responses should be averaged, also noting the highest and the lowest rating. If respondents then to an item such as "The reading teacher should strictly attempt to raise student test scores in reading on state tests," provide an average rating of 4, the the range should also be given as provided by respondents, from 2 to 5. It is good if respondents basically agree on how salient "raising test scores is," however, people have different philosophies and beliefs of how reading should be taught. Thus, there will be an average score or mean, as well as a range from high to low.

How should the results from the questionnaire be used? Improving reading instruction is a major goal of doing research in this area of the curriculum. By studying the results from the survey, teachers and administrators have a better idea of the needs of learners in curriculum development. For example, "the teacher should teach phonics by using a basal text in helping students learn sound/symbol relationships," the ratings may show that heavy emphasis should be placed on teaching

phonics systematically.” Does this mean that phonics should receive the major share of reading instruction time for primary grade students, especially first graders? Reading teachers then need to notice carefully which students do need more phonics instruction to unlock unknown words in reading. Survey results do need to be used effectively from a time demanding research questionnaire. Or if respondents indicated, somewhat evenly, that there should be individual as well as cooperative endeavors in reading, the teacher may study learners to notice which style of learning is most beneficial for the student.

If the questionnaire pertains to both primary and intermediate grade levels, the respondent may check in an appropriate box which of the two levels is being emphasized by the responder to the questionnaire. There should also be a place to indicate if the respondent is a teacher, principal, parent, or other. The results from the survey may be weighted if it is deemed that responses from teachers, for example, are more important than the others. Thus a certain percentage may be added to teachers’ responses if weighting is emphasized.

Should the number of respondents be too low, a follow up letter may be sent. Return postage should be included in questionnaires to be returned with a stamped, self addressed envelope.

Careful proof reading of the questionnaire is vital and cannot be over emphasized. Clear, accurate written communication is important! Respondents should be assured that the completed questionnaire will be kept confidential. Questionnaire spaces need to be left for open ended responses by respondents. Much time and effort go into developing and tabulating questionnaire results. In many school systems, the questionnaire will be designed to use machine scoring. It is worthwhile to do all things well!

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